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SUBJECT: SUBJECT: CODEL CARDIN HEARS FROM DISGRUNTLED

REFUGEES

11. (SBU) Summary: CODEL Cardin received briefings from the Damascus office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) February 28 and heard there are currently 225,000 Iraqis registered with UNHCR. More than half of these, UNHCR estimates, are not considering returning within the near future. Additionally, DHS, State and IOM briefed the CODEL on the admissions process and reported that their unified efforts were likely to result in the resettlement of nearly 12,000 Iraqis from Syria to the United States in FY 09. Finally, five outreach volunteers from the Iraqi refugee community who addressed the delegation, claimed they had been middle class before being forced from Iraq and were now facing extremely difficult conditions even with international community assistance. End summary.

12. (SBU) Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), Chairman of the Congressional Helsinki Commission, was joined by Senate colleagues Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), Ryan Wicker (R-MS), Thomas Udall (D-NM) and Representative Gwen Moore (D-WI), and Representative Mike McIntyre (D-NC). They and several professional staff members met UNHCR deputy Representative for Syria Philippe LeClerc who briefed on UNHCR's work to assist Iraqi refugees throughout the country. According to LeClerc, there are now 225,000 Iraqi refugees actively registered (those not resettled or known to have returned to Iraq) with UNHCR Damascus. Of these, 29,000 refugees who were eligible for food assistance failed to pick up their assistance packages over the last four months. LeClerc suggested some Iraqis may have found other means of support, but UNHCR believes most of these have left the country. LeClerc reported the Iraqi refugees include relatively very few unaccompanied minors, fewer even than among Bosnians displaced in the 1990s. He believed fewer than half those currently registered with UNHCR had plans to return to Iraq in the near future.

CONTINUING PROGRESS ON RESETTLEMENT

13. (SBU) On hand to brief the CODEL on the admission process were International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Chief of Mission Maria Rumman, PRM Regional Refugee Coordinator for Resettlement, and Department of Homeland Security's refugee interview "circiut-rideing" team leader, Frank Minnick. The resettlement experts detailed the progress the their respective organizations were making in meeting Congressional targets for the resettlement of Iraqi refugees to the United States. They reported nearly 5,000 Iraqi refugees were resettled to the U.S. during fiscal year '08, and IOM and DHS were on pace to resettle nearly 12,000 from Syria in fiscal year '09, making a sizable dent in the 17,000 resettlement target prescribed by Congress for this fiscal year. Rumman

reported that all the organizations involved in the resettlement process (UNHCR, IOM, State and DHS) were working in concert to meet set targets. The DHS team leader noted the high acceptance rate of Iraqi refugees cases processed through his team, this suggested many of these individuals had a verifiable and well founded fear of persecution if they returned to Iraq. The resettlement team outlined how the resettlement process works and fielded questions from the CODEL including specific concerns regarding the length of time it takes an refugee applicant to finally reach the United States.

OUTREACH ACTIVISTS REPORT ON REFUGEE PROBLEMS

14. (SBU) Five refugee women, representing 65 volunteers that help their community as outreach to the most vulnerable, briefed the delegation on health issues, children, women at risk, and problems of young men. One volunteer noted that women in Iraq had suffered a great deal even before the war, but the group as a whole complained sometimes bitterly about current circumstances.

15. (SBU) In reviewing a litany of hardships facing Iraqi refugees in Syria the outreach workers highlighted the challenges of dealing with chronic illnesses like cancer and children with disabilities. They claimed a high rate of infertility had resulted from weaponry of the coalition forces. Allowances received from the International Community through UNHCR were much too small for families - they mentioned 5000 Syrian Pounds a month, the equivalent of about USD 105, in rent subsidy. Women sometimes left their husbands in order to claim a larger stipend based on existing allowance criteria. Some parents pushed girls into marriage

at a relatively young age to lessen family financial burdens.

Occasionally, widows or single mothers with children considered prostitution to feed their families. Young children who should be in school, even as young as 9-to-11-year olds, were helping to support their families. These children had no future, the activists said. Those in school faced psychological challenges the result of war and displacement.

BLAMING AMERICA

16. (SBU) A Sunni member of the outreach group noted Iraqis had been middle class before the war but their situation had deteriorated drastically. "We hate Americans because we feel they destroyed Iraqis," said another, who spoke English to dramatize her point. She had been well off; the young men she knew had attended university before the war.

17. (SBU) Turning to complaints about what they had heard about life after resettlement in the U.S., the group said some refused U.S. resettlement because "three months" of support provided by the USG was not enough time to establish a new life for themselves and their families. Some refugees incorrectly believed American citizens had received substantial benefits not available to incoming refugee families. "We'd rather stay in Syria and be helped by the Syrian government and the Syrian citizens around us," than move to the United States, said one of the outreach workers. Iraqis preferred resettlement in Europe, according to others.

18. (SBU) CODEL members were visibly moved by the presentation and candid views expressed by the Iraqi outreach workers. Senator Cardin said that even with the recent increase in assistance and admissions numbers, he and others in Congress believed more needed to be done. The visit offered an excellent opportunity to highlight State and the Department of Homeland Security's successful efforts in providing assistance for and in the resettlement of vulnerable Iraqi refugees as prescribed by Congress.

19. (SBU) Senator Cardin did not have a chance to clear this report as of March 10.
CONNELLY